

"To promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which inhere in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

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## NEW DAY AT THE CROSS-ROADS

By George E. Clarkson\*

Agnes Sligh Turnbull's book, "The Gown of Glory" portrays the tribulations and joys of a rural pastor in bygone days. But there is an undertone that remains through the book until nearly the end. Mrs. Lyall, the pastor's wife, wants her husband to have a bigger opportunity! This spirit has for years plagued the work of the church in rural communities in America. It is still an undertone in the lives of some pastors and an undertone of spirit in some rural churches.

It is encouraging, though, that this undertone is waning and a new day is dawning in rural America, but it has not yet come to its noon-day fullness. Some rural pastors who have already liberated themselves from these feelings, and some congregations now realize that their church, though small in numbers, may well be the best church fellowship they will ever know. The bigness that counts in Christian fellowship is not statistical bigness, but bigness of spirit. Pettiness is found in places both large and small. And a strong fellowship can often be found more easily in a church small in numbers than in one whose crowning glory seems to be an impressive membership roll.

Dr. George Buttrick was one time with a group of pastors discussing church policy. One of them made a remark about a small church. Buttrick quickly commented: "There is no small church!" In a sense he was correct. A church of Christ, is neither small nor unimportant. We find in Christ's words and life no basis for

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We are grateful to Mr. Clarkson for preparing this hopeful statement especially for the Christian Rural Fellowship.

I. W. Moomaw  
Secretary



despising any group of Christians, however small. "If two or three are gathered together in My Name ..... " Condescension has no place in any Christian fellowship.

However, we all realize that there are many churches, both rural and urban, that are too small in membership or financial resources to support a minister and his family properly. It is hopeful to see that denominational leaders and some communities are becoming more aware of this and are taking steps to correct it.

#### SOME SIGNS OF PROMISE:

One of the encouraging signs is the attitude of some young men just entering the ministry. During a meeting of our Conference Board of Ministerial Training, two able young men, both with another year of seminary training to complete, were asked: "Why did you choose our conference?" One had been brought up in a metropolitan area, and they were room-mates. They replied as though they had given the matter long thought. "We want to join this conference because it has more rural churches. We want to serve in the country and we think that this conference has more opportunities in that field." They showed in their words a changing attitude toward the rural church. Part of this change is the result of the battle for recognition fought out by Rural Fellowship groups. Part of it represents the work of the departments of rural church in some of our seminaries, and denominational rural leaders. Part of the change has come from the widespread changes at the cross-roads and in the villages of our day.

One factor slow to change has been the financial situation. But even that change is on the way. There are some rural parishes now that support their pastors better than many city churches. A church official, when leaving his position to return to the pastorate, recently asked his bishop for a certain rural parish. There was at least one evident reason for the request: the parish paid a good salary. This situation would probably not have occurred a few years ago, certainly not in that particular situation. The bishop, with wisdom, suggested that the executive was too old for the work there since a rural parish of that type needed a younger man.

This too, is an encouraging part of the new dawn: the realization that a rural parish is not a place for the inexperienced or those who want a certain measure of leisure before retiring. Work in a rural parish is an exacting and demanding vocation. It demands special training and skill. Increasingly, rural pastors realize this and some are attending summer schools and institutes to keep abreast of the new challenges that confront them.

Wherever a minister serves, be it in the country or the city or along the "fringe" areas, the best is demanded of him in preaching, leadership, counselling, and pastoral work. But in the country, the distances involved make special demands upon the pastor in his pastoral work. Most rural pastors must do a considerable amount of driving, some as much as 20,000 miles per year or more.



Dr. George Buttrick once told us that "the church in New York City is built on shoe-leather." There is a good measure of truth in this saying, for pastoral calling in the city does involve plenty of shoe-leather. But in a rural parish, the pastoral work of the church is usually built on rubber! The rural pastor must drive, drive and drive - as well as study, study and pray. He must plan his work with great care to save unnecessary trips, but just because a person lives ten miles or more from the parsonage is no reason why he or she should be neglected.

Alert congregations are awake to these facts, and, in increasing numbers, are providing driving allowances. Some are making flat grants. Others pay on the basis of actual driving reports and on a mileage basis. Such rural pastors are not unduly penalized for being faithful to their duties. There was a time when, if it were not for the pastor's consecration to his task, some might have neglected certain calls just to balance a personal budget, especially if the call were a distant one; let us say, to a jail in a city some miles away. With small salaries, this was at times more than a temptation. It was almost a stark necessity in order to pay bills and to have food for the family. This is all changing; the rural pastor has new and better opportunities to serve because his people are cooperating.

#### LAYMEN TAKE PART:

The work of Christian laymen has also brought about changes in our rural parishes. With a shortage of ministers, many churches, essential to neighborhood life, would have closed permanently had it not been for the services of Christian laymen. Their aid has been a God-send in many places, as they lead in worship, preach, pray and visit. Some of the Protestant churches in America, strong in their lay ministry in early days, saw a decline in this work over the years as a more highly trained ministry developed. Now, the lay ministry is again a steady, continuing blessing in the life of the church. Here, a retired railroad man; there, a farmer; here, an automobile dealer; there, a school executive; - all in God's work, helping to keep the church strong.

But rural communities themselves have been changing, perhaps more than we realize. Fewer farmers, in almost any given area, means that either the remaining churches have had to unite, or those living on the land who still want the church near them, have to





same neighborhood, and the new rural resident making an adjustment to a personal way of living. Now, he wants to know his neighbor and his neighbor is willing to give him a hand on his new car port.

In some communities, we shall need to supplement the local salary of a trained minister with corporate church funds. In others, the expanding and changing community should challenge the best of our leadership.

#### LONGER TENURE:

Other factors being equal, longer ministries are possible, and almost imperative under changing conditions. Five and ten year pastorates are no longer as unusual in rural churches as they once were. Two rural pastors in our conference have passed the quarter century mark in their ministry to their respective communities. One of my predecessors served forty years in this very place. Teachers, doctors, lawyers, and workers in industry do not ordinarily move into our rural communities, expecting to leave in two years. Some do move frequently, but most of them come, expecting (or at least hoping) to stay for life. So, the rural pastor need not think of moving as soon as disagreement rears its head, - any more than anyone else thinks of it. If he lives with the people and over the years, shows a genuine love for serving them as their pastor, then the bonds of Christian love will grow stronger as the years go by. Then, pastor and people will come to realize that the only "better church" that any of us need to know is that "better church" that is to be right where we live.

The new day is dawning but there is much yet that we must do to bring it to its noon-day fullness.



support the increasing costs with larger gifts. On the whole, with farm income better than a generation ago, consecrated farmers are better able to support the churches they love. Rural churches have joined hands in some places, until many of those that are left are not financial burdens but quite within the abilities of the area to support. In other localities, new faces have come in, counteracting the declining farm population, thereby, making the ministry at the cross-roads more important than ever. This growth of the rural, non-farm population has often meant a problem of assimilation and many new community relationships to explore. Many of our old circuits or yoked churches need to be set up all over again with a more sound sociological approach.

The decentralization of industry has also brought changes. I lived for twelve years in a small village that was blessed with desirable rural industry. This beautiful hamlet was left in the doldrums during the depression when the railroad roundhouse and "pushers" were taken to a city forty miles away.

Then came a new power station of moderate size. Young families began moving in. The church membership increases slowly, but the growth is secure, and now there are children everywhere, - portents of a good future. The church now pays a salary larger than the entire budget ten years before. No longer is "church" just a one-day-a-week affair; community activities are centered in the little white church on the square near the lake. And the new central school has been decentralized enough to include a new 225-pupil grade school. The smaller communities are not all being swallowed up; some are growing up. All over our land, many small communities are experiencing a new lease on life. These places must have the ministry of the church of Christ if that life is to be the life abundant.

The church where we are now serving illustrates this change in another way. Five miles from a modest city, the population is steadily growing. By uniting the two remaining churches in this rural community (about 1860 there were six churches in this same parish), it has been possible to present a strong program and approach. In 1933, the total budget of the two churches was \$1,735. By 1945, this had increased to \$2,393. Today, including funds paid in toward a new church addition, the budget will exceed \$20,000; - yet, this is still a rural church. We live in the country, with three barns within sight of our kitchen. But, how the church has changed! And, through change, it is meeting the needs of a changed community better than it did before.

#### TO REAFFIRM OUR FAITH IN NEW WAYS:

The church dare not stand still lest it be left behind. It must go forward, - reaffirming the basic tenets of our faith in



new ways. May we suggest here a few directions in which we must go if we are to mold rural society on a new Christian pattern.

#### REDISCOVER CHRISTIAN HOME LIFE:

Rural America has long cherished its strong home life. Many factors have contributed to weaken its power. The rural church should uphold family-centered events for so many other institutions tend to stratify the family. And, through a counseling program, life in the home can be strengthened.

#### GREATER USE OF LAY WORKERS:

The rural church needs to use lay workers more than ever, through visitation committees, for contacting new families. If the rural church is alive to its community responsibilities, these new people will become not only related to the church, but through it, to each other. The bonds of new community ties will be built up through the church that serves.

#### CONSIDER THE CHURCH PROPERTY:

Many old church properties, lovely as some of them may be, are no longer adequate for the needs of a modern rural community. They were built primarily for worship, before church schools were given the importance that we accord them today.

Many, many rural communities do not need several church buildings erected almost exclusively for worship. What we do need is one fine church structure at each cross-roads community, with facilities for individual classes, social affairs, and for community use as well as for worship. There are new dwellers in our changing communities who stand aloof from a church that just continues to follow the old patterns. But once the church fellowship shows the vision and courage to proceed with a program that is adequate for the community, one after another, they start adding their help to the enterprise.

#### INCLUDE PASTORAL COUNSELING:

The rural minister as well as the urban pastor, should be trained in counseling. He needs to be trained in rural sociology as well as theology, so that he can better understand the new rural society. Some say that "men are the same everywhere, - city or country." This is a half-truth. Even with the same basic and sinful natures, our habit patterns vary. There is still a gulf between the mind-set of an apartment dweller on New York's East Side, and the rural resident who has always lived in the